National Wildland Fire Outlook

National Interagency Fire Center
Predictive Services Group

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Wildland Fire Outlook – February through August, 2004

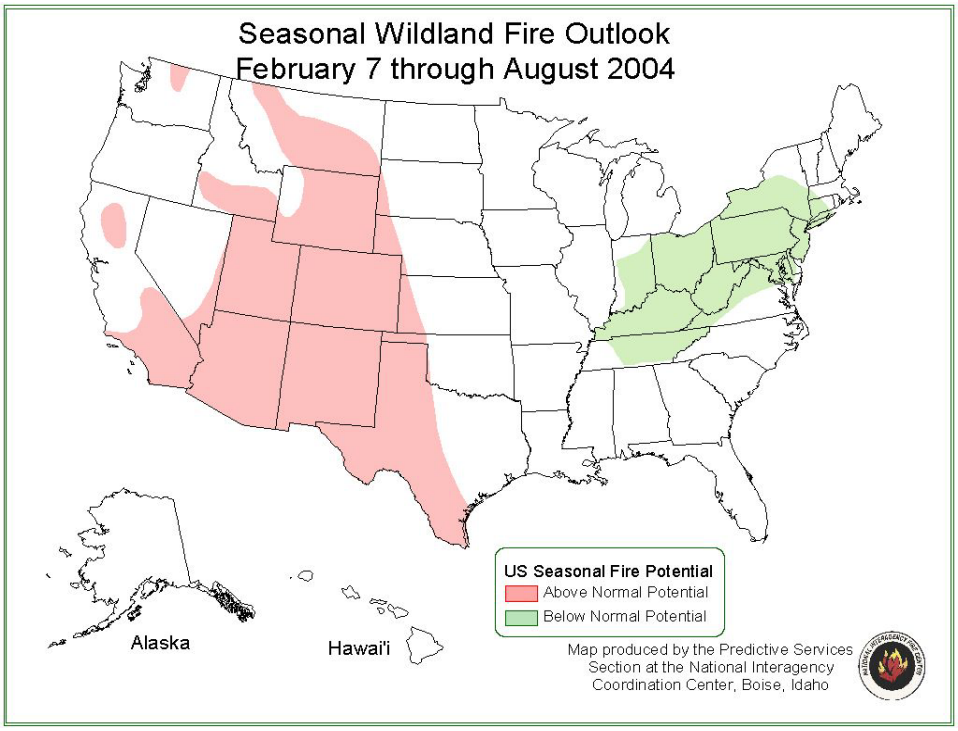
Overall, the 2004 fire season is expected to be near normal in terms of the expected number of fire and acres burned. However, **much of the interior West is expected to experience above normal fire potential this season.** Some highlights of the upcoming season include:

- Long-term drought persists over much of the interior West. Drought stressed and/or insect damaged vegetation continues to increase in the West leading to greater potential for large, destructive wildfires at mid to high elevations.

- The Southwest is the driest area of the West. The fire season is expected to start early and has the potential to be comparable to 2002.

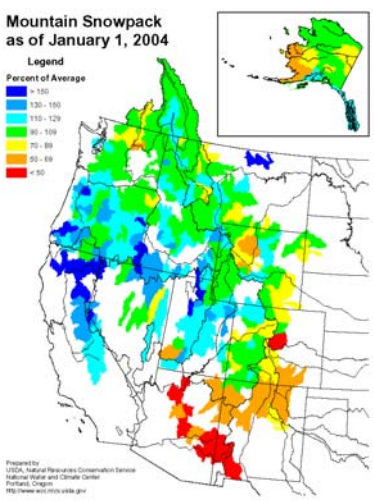
- Mountain snowpack and winter precipitation is above normal mainly in the Pacific Northwest and northern California. The spring and summer should be warmer than normal in the West. Spring should be drier than normal in the Southwest but wetter than usual in the Northwest. Even with a wet spring, the unknown factor will be June weather in the Northwest and Northern Rockies. The combination of a hot, dry June and long-term drought could mitigate the benefits from a wet winter and spring.

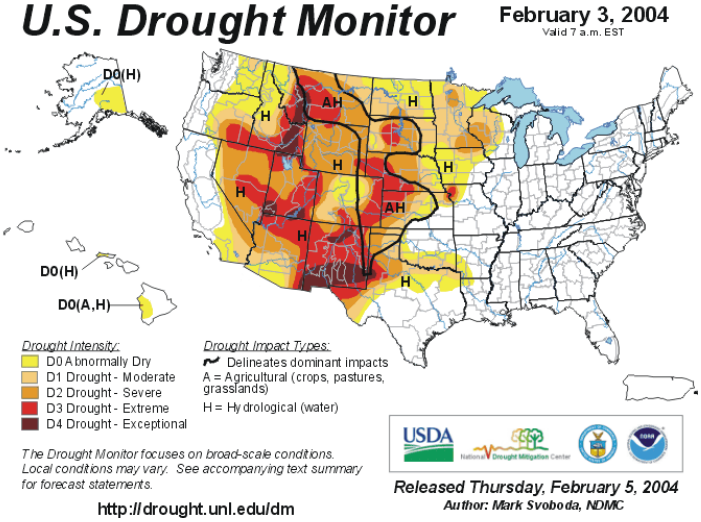
- The South (outside of west Texas and the Oklahoma Panhandle), East and Alaska are expected to have a near to below normal fire season.



Weather

Current projections are for continued neutral to weak El Niño conditions and this should result in little if any impact on the weather this spring and summer. Since October, much of the Northwest, northern Rockies, Midwest and the Northeast have seen normal to above normal precipitation with drier than normal weather across the southern tier of states, particularly over the Southwest. Snowpacks are higher than last year in most areas, except for Arizona and New Mexico. The outlook for spring and summer indicate warmer than usual temperatures in the West with a wet spring in the Northwest. This will likely lead to an early start for the fire season in the Southwest.





Geographic Area Discussions

Alaska: Potential: Normal. Snowpacks have been near to above normal across most of the state except for drier than average conditions in the upper Tanana Valley and adjacent drainages in eastern Alaska. The upcoming fire season is expected to be normal. Eastern Alaska should see the greatest potential for large fires due to the low snowpack and an expected warmer than normal spring and early summer.

Southwest: Potential: Above Normal. The fire season has potential to be comparable to 2002. This is based on continued drought, less than normal winter precipitation and the forecast of a warmer and drier than normal spring. These conditions could lead to an early onset of the primary fire season, with both live and dead fuel components being drier than usual and more readily available for combustion. Grass and brush are more abundant in some areas than in past drought years due to rainfall received during the late winter and spring of 2003. The total area of deforestation caused by drought and insect damage has continued to increase resulting in additional dead fuel loading. A significant unknown is how spring weather, especially precipitation, may affect the overall situation. Spring precipitation can mitigate fire season severity in forested areas while leading to increased fire potential in grass and brush fuels.

Northern Rockies: Potential: Normal to Above Normal. Long-term drought continues to plague the Northern Rockies Area. Given that snowfall has been near normal and a normal spring is expected, most of the area should have average fire potential. However, portions of southeast Montana and the east slopes of the Continental Divide will see an elevated fire risk as this area has seen less than normal winter precipitation to date.

Great Basin: Potential: Normal to Above Normal. Winter rain and snow has been near to above average in most areas except for a few areas including southeast Idaho, southern Utah and portions of southern and western Nevada. The combination of drought with an expected warmer and drier than usual spring should lead to an above normal fire season for most of the eastern Great Basin, excluding the central Idaho mountains and western Wyoming. Most of Nevada should experience more normal fire potential.

Northwest: Potential: Normal to Above Normal. Current snowpack indicates a normal fire season in the Northwest, except in the Okanogan/Wenatchee area in north-central Washington. The Oregon snowpack is 124% of normal to date with every river basin registering 2-3 times greater than in 2003. The Washington snowpack has shown some improvement since mid-January and is near 100% of normal, except 85% on the Chelan/ Entiat/ Wenatchee River Basins. The Chelan, Wenatchee and Methow River Basins are all similar to last year at this time. Both the mountain snowpack and rainfall at the lower elevations indicate that the Wenatchee/Okanogan is the only area in the Northwest that remains in a moisture deficit. The long range forecasts through the spring and summer indicate a wet spring and dry summer. If snowpack remains above 110% of normal through the first of April and the area experiences a wet spring, fire statistics show the threat of a severe fire season to be minimal However, the probability of a severe fire season increases considerably if June is dry. A hot, dry June combined with the drought could rapidly dry both the live and dead/downed fuels.

Northern and Southern California: **Potential: Normal to Above Normal.** Winter precipitation has greatly favored northern California with above average rainfall and snowpack. On the other hand, southern California has been drier than normal. Much of southern California will have an above average fire potential due to a dry winter, long-term drought and associated tree/brush mortality, and the forecast of a warmer and somewhat drier than normal spring. The heavy, low elevation snowfall in northern California has crushed some of the brush in the foothills surrounding the northern Sacramento Valley. This area may see an elevated risk of fires later this summer when the grasses cure out.

Rocky Mountain: **Potential: Normal to Above Normal.** Snowpacks generally are much improved over the last two years with most readings currently in the 80-105% range as compared to 50-90% last year at this time. The exceptions to this include portions of the Colorado Front Ranges and the Black Hills where values are around 65% of average. Most of the area is expected to have near normal temperatures and precipitation. Given the long-term drought effects, most of the area will have above average fire potential. However, an early start to the fire season is unlikely.

Eastern Area: **Potential: Normal to Below Normal.** Much of the region has experienced near to above normal precipitation. However, some dryness and lingering drought effects continue in portions of Minnesota, western Wisconsin, Iowa and northwest Missouri. While these areas may see an elevated risk for large fires during short-term episodes of dry weather, prolonged periods of above normal fire activity are unlikely. The remainder of the geographic area is expected to have a normal to below normal fire season.

Southern Area: **Potential: Below Normal to Above Normal.** No significant long-term trends for widespread dry conditions are evident. Chances remain for short episodes of elevated fire danger which is typical of normal fire seasons. West Texas and the Oklahoma Panhandle are the primary areas of concern based on current conditions, drought, and a modest potential for above normal temperatures and near to slightly below normal rainfall. Another area of concern is in North Carolina where increased fuel loadings are found in the Northeast Coastal Plain (Hurricane Isabel) and North Central Piedmont (January 2004 ice storm damage).

Note: This national outlook and some geographic area assessments are currently available at the NICC and GACC websites. The GACC websites can also be accessed though the NICC webpage at: www.nifc.gov/news/pred_services/Main_page.htm